

Focus Group Research: Libraries, Social Media, & Effective Marketing

Kristin Stewart

Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California

Focus Group Research: Libraries, Social Media, & Effective Marketing

According to Pew Research Center's research on Generation Z, 45% of 13-to-17-year-olds are on the internet "almost constantly, and 44% use the internet "Several times a day" (Parker & Igielnik, 2021). Including anyone born after 1996, Generation Z is often described as the children raised with a phone in their hands. Looking further at Pew Research, 95% percent of 13-to-17-year-olds have access to a smartphone, and 97% use one or more of seven major online Social Media platforms, the most popular being YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat (Parker & Igielnik, 2021).

As Generation Z grows, they will become the next group of library patrons, seen through the simple passage of time. With this in mind, some libraries have decided to create social media accounts to try to reach a wider audience. These accounts reach not just Generation Z but often Millennials. Pew Research reports that Millennials are more likely to use public libraries than older generations already, with 53% of Millennials reporting to a library in 2016 (Geiger, 2020). These two generations spend a fair amount of time online, causing many libraries to present themselves where younger generations already are. There are questions raised by the head-first jump into social media marketing, though.

Is social media an effective marketing tool for reaching these generations and an effective use of staff time and resources? As the popular culture moves deeper into social media marketing, this is a question that needs to be answered for any library looking to create a social media account and post regularly. Social media is being used as a tool for public libraries to combat widespread internet use, build community, and attract new patrons (Choi & Joo, 2018). Is it an effective tool, though? Are viewers interacting? Do they view library content as content,

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: SOCIAL MEDIA

or rather as an ad for the library? Understanding these questions and the answers to them will help libraries decide if and how to utilize social media to attract new patrons and advertise events and services.

Method

Procedure

One focus group was conducted, which lasted thirteen minutes. The group moderator was a graduate student in the Master of Management in Library and Information Science program at USC.

Participants

A total of three participants—all-female—took part in the study. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 36 years, placing them in the Millennial Generation. No members of Gen Z took part in the focus group, thus adding a bit of a hole in the research that must be acknowledged. Participants were all of Caucasian and African American ethnicity. All participants are also library patrons and regular users of various social media websites and apps. The apps and websites they used did vary wildly depending on lifestyle, age, and career path as well, providing a range of experience regarding experiences.

Focus Group

The focus group discussion consisted of two categories of questions. The first category focused on social media, its use, how often the participants use social media, and which websites and apps they frequent. This section was used to understand better how participants interact with

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: SOCIAL MEDIA

social media and how the participants think of and interact with the ads that appear on these sites. The second category focused on the participants' interactions with their local libraries. Questions include how often the participants go to their local libraries, what services they take advantage of, and why they choose to do something else rather than go to the library. The moderator guide for this focus group can be seen in Appendix A.

Findings

One of the more interesting conclusions that the participants came to was that it was nearly impossible to gauge how much time one spends on social media today. The phrases “in the background” and “constant” were repeated regularly. Social media is always on in the background, either on another tab or a notification coming to a phone or Apple watch. If everyone is already on social media at times, it makes sense that businesses and public works, such as libraries, try to be on these websites and ads.

The participants all also maintained other social media accounts as well. The most common account used by the participants was Instagram, but TikTok was also mentioned a few times. All participants mentioned at least two extensively used accounts as well. They were often used for different things; one may be used to keep in contact with family, another for business reasons, and another still for communicating with friends. This entwined them even further to social media as a whole, using it to aid a business or communicate with friends making it an even more significant part of their lives.

On the topic of advertisements and interacting with social media advertisements, the participants all agreed that knowing how the ads work made it much easier to resist and ignore the ads that come across their social media. One participant mentioned that ads rarely change

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: SOCIAL MEDIA

how she interacts with the world unless her friends also seem interested in something. The example she used was a nearby Vaughn Gough exhibit, which an ad may have sparked an initial interest in, but that she likely would not have gone to if not for her friends also being interested. From this conversation, the entire group agreed that they were more likely to be influenced by the interests of their friends than the targeting of a social media ad.

When speaking specifically about library social media, participants mentioned that they often interact out of obligation rather than interest. The two participants then see and interact with library social media posts regularly felt that if they did not, it might not reach the person who needed to see it. The participants understood how social media algorithms function and that to do well, the library's page needed regular interaction through likes, shares, and comments. Understanding how algorithms work is something that many people looking to do well in social media look into and even post about to draw in patrons. Creators urge people to like and comment on all platforms. One participant mentioned that by interacting, she was helping the library do well and that she interacted because it would help the social media campaigns to do well. Another participant agreed, saying they watched content but were not always interested because they wanted the library to do well.

All the participants also stated that while they loved their libraries, they had been unable to visit regularly due to pandemic closures, and that had changed their habits. They stopped frequenting libraries and found other places that met their needs. Often, these places would even offer more than a library does. One example mentioned repeatedly was that certain conditions might lead them to go to a Barnes & Noble rather than their local library.

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: SOCIAL MEDIA

One participant mentioned that Barnes & Noble offers coffee and light foods in their café, while most libraries do not. They may wish to eat or drink while reading or studying, and a library simply does not allow that. Some large libraries include a small coffee shop or café, but you are not allowed to take your food or drink outside the café area. The expectation of silence was also brought up, one participant arguing that it could be off-putting, another saying it could help with solo homework and study but is not for all time. Still, they both said they “associated the library with being quiet” despite not being true to actual experiences in libraries.

When asked about free programs vs paid for programs outside the library, the answers came down to time, convenience, and interest. One example was that they would “pay to see Neil Gaiman rather than going to see a local author for free.” Another participant noted that library programs tend to stay to the typical Monday-Friday work week when planning events, making it an inconvenience for her, who works on Sundays, for example, and cannot make those events.

Discussion

When looking at this data, we can see that the tools are already in place for libraries to use social media effectively, but also that it cannot be a library’s only tool to bring in new patrons and members. A library would need to choose the right social media and content to begin with and then have a community that is willing to interact to help promote the library so more people will see it. Unfortunately, this would require a certain amount of social literacy from both the library staff and the public, which is not always available or reasonable to expect depending on the average age and financial means.

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: SOCIAL MEDIA

Some of this gathered data is likely highly effected by the pandemic though. It is possible that in an age of better financial security and more freedom to travel about, the answers regarding library visitation and ads my be vastly different. If it is safe, one may be more likely to go to a public area such as a library. Likewise, when one has money to spend, they are more likely to click on ads and actually buy something.

Libraries should also maintain other marketing means even as they delve into social media. The more time someone spends on social media, the easier it is to become desensitized to anything that may resemble an ad. Even something from a company or group someone love can feel invasive or annoying. So, libraries should continue to speak about events with their patrons, making flyers, and speaking to local reporters and event coordinators to spread the news of services, programs, and events. Used in combination with social media, a library could reach as many people as possible and possibly even bring in new regular patrons.

If this Focus Group were to be repeated, I would suggest getting a further diversity of age groups and gender. This would gain more opinions and experience and lead to a larger amount of data. Only having a handful of perceptions is a start, but more data can aid in seeing what even more groups think of social media, libraries, and advertisements. I would also suggest a less structured approach to the questioning. While getting the data presented above was important, going off the answers of the participants may lead to interesting and enlightening discussions that the moderator may not have ever thought of.

References

- Choi, N., & Joo, S. (2018). Understanding public libraries' challenges, motivators, and perceptions toward the use of social media for marketing. *Library Hi Tech*, 39(2), 352–367. <https://doi.org/10.1108/lht-11-2017-0237>
- Geiger, A. W. (2020, July 27). Public library use in U.S. highest among Millennials. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/21/millennials-are-the-most-likely-generation-of-americans-to-use-public-libraries/>.
- Parker, K., & Igielnik, R. (2021, May 31). *What We Know About Gen Z So Far*. Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>.

Appendix A

Moderator Guide: Social Media Use in Libraries

Problem: Some staff members have suggested creating more interactive social media for the library to connect with teen and young adult patrons. There has been some disagreement as to whether or not this would be effective. Unfortunately, seeing that we are, for the most part, far outside our target audience, it's difficult to see if this would help or not from an internal discussion.

Goal: See if local teens and young adults would be interested in this, which platforms they frequent, and how often online interactions translate to real-life actions, such as going to certain places more or taking advantage of different services.

Participants and Reimbursement: We would ask patrons and community members between the ages of 14 and 39 to participate in our focus group. An excellent place to start would be to approach patrons within the library casually. But these are young adults who already go to the library. It would also be good to put an advertisement on the library website and partner with local high schools and colleges to advertise the focus groups to their students. To incentivize, we will offer a small monetary reimbursement for the hour or so of their time of \$20.

I. Intro/Warm-up

Hello, and thank you for taking part in our study on social media and libraries! This will only take around an hour and hopefully, help us understand your opinions on social media and libraries. Your answers today will help us formulate a social media presence for our library. I

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: SOCIAL MEDIA

will be asking you a series of questions, and I would just like you to answer them honestly. Let the conversation flow without getting off-topic, please! No ideas or opinions are bad!

II. Social Media

- a. Which social media platforms do you frequent the most?
- b. How much time a day do you spend on social media?
- c. What sort of creators and content do you consume?
- d. How often does social media make you want to try something new, like a hobby, food, product, or event?

III. Libraries

- a. How often do you visit the library?
- b. What do you like about the library?
- c. What do you dislike?
- d. Why do you choose other activities over visiting the library?

IV. Social Media and our Library

- a. What do you think about when you think of the library?
- b. What sort of content would you expect to see? What would you like to see?
- c. What makes you want to follow a creator?

V. Show examples of Library Social Media accounts' content. A couple from each the more popular sites, such as TikTok, Instagram, or Snapchat.

- a. (Probe) What do you like about these videos?
 - i. What do you dislike about them?
- b. (Probe) Which of these videos stands out the most to you? What did you like or dislike about it?

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: SOCIAL MEDIA

c. Did you find it more or less engaging than the sort of content you usually watch?

Why or why not?

d. (Probe) What would make it more engaging to watch in your mind?

VI. Conclusion

Thank you so much for your time today! Your input has been extremely helpful to our project, and we will be sure to put it to good use. If you would like to keep up with the progress of this project, we will be posting updates on our library's website as information becomes available. We hope you keep in touch and continue to frequent our library. You can pick up the \$20 reimbursement for your time from me as you're ready to leave.